

Scripture: Exodus 20:13-14; Matthew 5:21-30

Sermon Title: "Actions of the Heart"

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Today we are continuing our journey through the Ten Commandments as we consider the sixth and seventh commandments: "you shall not murder" and "you shall not commit adultery". We will again be holding the question of what do these laws mean for the modern day Christ follower?

Now, it may seem odd to pair these two commandments together, yet they both have a similar focus – they both are focused on action – doing something physically. Taking another life, breaking a vow to be faithful and giving yourself to another. And we could take our time today to explore the physical side and the physical implications of these commands. We could ponder what it means to murder – as you very well may know some translations of the Bible say "you shall not kill". What's the difference? How does premeditation fit in, how about self-defense, and so on – there is much we could discuss with both commands. Yet, I don't want us to get bogged down in the details today about how they are broken by physical action. For Jesus teaches us as part of the Sermon on the Mount, which is our second reading today, that these commands should not be just about the actions of our physical being, not just about the actions of our hands but it's just as important to consider the actions of our hearts. It's not just about what we do on the outside but what we feel, what we experience, what we are letting grow on the inside.

And so today I want us to explore the connection between the outside and the inside – how do the actions of our hands relate to the actions of our hearts, how is what we do connected with what we feel or think? Now, we see this idea come about in many different ways in our lives where we acknowledge that it is not just about what one can see on the outside but also what is going on in the inside. Let me share a quick story - a number of years ago now, when I was visiting my grandmother, I was there over lunchtime and so I went to the refrigerator to grab a little something to eat. Well, my

eyes fell immediately on a container of chicken salad and it happened to be from my favorite store – a little family run market! I was thrilled and in its container it looked so good on the outside. So I took it out of the fridge, and with haste I made a sandwich, took a bit – and something wasn't right. It was tangy – it wasn't supposed to be tangy. And while my mind was telling me that it was spoiled, I was hoping that this wasn't true – I really wanted this salad so I took another bit hoping that the first had something to do with my palate or something else. Wishful thinking! It was still tangy. And then I looked at the expiration date on the container, and realized and came to accept that though it looked okay on the outside, it in fact was spoiling from the inside. So much for lunch. Now that's just one, light-hearted example from my own life but there are many saying or experiences that look at this idea of something seeming to be good on the outside but not so good on the inside. Think of a “wolf in sheep's clothing”. Looks friendly but is actually ready to tear you to pieces. Or the historic “Trojan horse”. Looks like a great gift of peace but is filled with soldiers ready to destroy! Or from the fairy tale realm, think of Snow White with the poisoned apple – looks so enticing on the outside but is filled with death. Again, it's not just about what is on the outside but also what is on the inside.

And this I believe is at the core of Christ's teachings on these two commands. When Jesus is teaching regarding these rather weighty commandments, we are reminded that it's not just about the external actions but the internal causes - it's not just about the physical action but what leads us to the action – what builds inside of us that cause us to harm another. The sixth command, according to the teachings of Christ, is not just about warning us again physically taking a life, it's about encouraging us to quell the anger, the hatred, I will even extend it to the fear which all begin to plant seeds of contempt, can begin to rot us from the inside and eventually, if not contained or controlled may lead to actions one will regret. The same is true for Jesus' line of reasoning and teaching when it comes to adultery. It is about controlling the things that may lead us eventually to actions that hurt others.

So how exactly do we do that – how do we keep our hearts healthy – make the actions of our hearts pure? When it comes to anger, which I will expand to hatred and fear as well, it's about reconciliation – after all, we all get angry. This may be going and talking with the person with whom you are angry, processing it and finding closure or it may be releasing the anger within through non-harmful ways – screaming into a pillow can be rather therapeutic when you need to let some anger out so that it doesn't destroy you from within – if you have never tried it, I would highly recommend it! It's about cleansing yourself of that anger, resentment, dislike, distrust, so that it does not build into an action that one will regret. An action that may not culminate in death, but may still hurt someone if not physically, emotionally. And then when Jesus talks about lust, he too is referring to the ways of removing the things in our lives which could lead to an action that one will regret. But here, Jesus is using some language that surely caught the attention of the crowd he was teaching and continues to catch us off-guard today – “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.... if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away”. Wow! That escalated quickly. Yet this is not literal and is more hyperbole, like when some says, “this bag weighs a ton” – it doesn't actually weigh 2000 pounds – so this hyperbole like any is so outrageous that is not to be taken literally. Still, it points to a truth – when someone says a “bag weighs a ton” they are saying the bag is rather heavy. For Jesus, it is the same – again, it's about removing and controlling the things within which can rot, which can grow into something that will lead us into paths of harm. Not physically harming oneself, that seems counterproductive to all of this work which is about not harming, but being mindful of what is going on within us so as to prevent actions that will hurt others.

Still, all of these lessons from Jesus as he is teachings on these two commandments, all of these lessons which seek to keep us healthy and whole from the inside out, are as much to prevent us from exploding all over others and hurting those around us as it is about making us healthy and whole for ourselves. For it will lead to a better life for us. It means too that we don't only strive to have a world where actions of hate and hurt

are no more but where the actions of the heart are also pure. Where we are all changed from the inside out. Where the actions of the heart lead our hands into paths of righteousness, love, and grace. This may seem like a tall order as Jesus expands these commandments, yet it will lead to a world that more and more reflects the kingdom of God. So may we not be spoiled chicken salad, or a wolf in sheep's clothing, or a Trojan horse, or a poisoned apple, but may we strive to live a life where the outside matches the inside and both are healthy, whole, and so very good for ourselves and for those around us! So be it and may it be so. Amen.